

**National Public Health Week
Designing Healthy Communities: Raising Healthy Kids**

**Access to Healthy Food
Fact Sheet**

Why is healthy eating important?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the number one cause of death in Michigan, placing a heavy economic burden on the state. Additionally, obesity is a known risk factor for cardiovascular disease, as well as many other serious health problems. Improving diet quality can play an important role in CVD and obesity management while reducing associated health risks. Therefore, it is increasingly important for individuals and organizations to come together to work on a community-wide approach to promoting healthy, active lifestyles.

What is “healthy” eating?

The details of this question often elude even the best and the brightest public health practitioners. We often face responses from community members such as:

- “Nutrition information changes daily so I’ve just given up trying.”
- “I’ve eaten this way my whole life, why should I change now?”
- “My grandfather ate a pound of bacon and a dozen eggs every day and lived to be 90 – nutrition doesn’t matter.”
- “Who has time to eat healthy?”
- “A healthy diet is too complicated and costly.”

Healthy eating means focusing on:

- Fruit and vegetables in the form of fresh, frozen, canned, dried and 100% juice
- Whole grain products
- Low fat dairy products

Focusing on Fruit and Vegetables

The research base supporting an increased fruit and vegetable intake for improved health status grows daily. The problem is that only 20% of adults are eating more than five, ½ cup servings per day – an amount recommended for moderately active 2- to 3-year olds (State of the Plate, 2005).

- High fruit and vegetable intakes are associated with a lower risk of coronary heart disease, stroke and certain cancers; plus improvement of blood pressure and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol.
- Women ages 25-74 with over three servings per day of fruits and vegetables were associated with 27 percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease (CVH) and 15 percent lower CVD mortality (Bazzano et al, AJCN, 2002).
- Increasing one’s fruit and vegetable intake is common weight-control advice as most fruits and vegetables have fewer calories per serving than most foods making them a good substitute for higher calorie foods.
- The beneficial effects of fruits and vegetables are considered to derive mainly from high content of fiber, antioxidants, minerals, folate, and phytochemicals.

Kids See, Then Kids Eat

- Many of children’s food preferences are formed as early as age 2-3 years.
- Children’s fruit and vegetable choices will resemble those of their parents.
- Children need opportunities to be exposed to a wide variety of fruit and vegetables in their day.
- Children’s food preferences do not change significantly between the ages of 2-3 and age 8.

- Less than 5 percent of preschoolers eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Less than 20 percent of Michigan high school students eat five fruits and vegetables a day (they need 8-11 fruits and vegetables every day)!
- Children of all ages have especially low intakes of citrus, melons, berries, and dark green/yellow vegetables.
- The more a family spends on fast food, the less likely their young children are to eat their fruits and vegetables!
- The strongest predictors of fruit and vegetable intake in adults is whether they like the taste, being in the habit since childhood, and the number of servings they thought they should consume.
- French fried potatoes constitute 23 percent of all vegetables eaten in the U.S.
- Fruits and vegetables that are fried, in chips, candy, and condiments make up a sizeable portion of fruit and vegetable exposure of most U.S. children.

Serving a large variety of fruits and vegetables to your children, enjoying the fruits and vegetables in front of your kids, and teaching your kids the value of eating more fruits and vegetables are all key ways to help your children stay healthy for a lifetime.

Economic Benefits to Michigan

The economic benefits of population-based strategies to increase fruit and vegetable intake are also evident.

- If every Michigan family spent \$10.00 per week on Michigan-based products, we would return \$35 million to the Michigan economy each week (Select MI Campaign, 2005).
- If consumers ate more than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, we'd see an additional \$1,750,000 per year for the average U.S. supermarket (PBH 5 A Day The Color Way for Retailers).

Cheap, Healthy Food

A common misperception is that fruits and vegetables are expensive; however, according to the Economic Research Service (Bulletin 792-4), a consumer can get an average of seven servings of fruits and vegetables per day for just 64 cents.

Reducing Health Care Costs

An increase in fruit and vegetable intake has the potential to slow the skyrocketing of health care costs.

- According to a recent study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, men aged 40-55 have an annual CVD Medicare expenditure of \$4,223 associated with a low fruit and vegetable intake (less than one serving per day) compared to \$3,128 associated with a high fruit and vegetable intake (more than three servings per day of each – fruits and vegetables).

Increasing Access To Healthy Food

Policy and environmental changes have the potential to make a positive impact on eating habits for entire communities.

Examples of environmental changes include:

- Creation and use of community and/or school gardens.
- Creation and support of local farmers' markets or mini-markets.

Examples of policy changes include:

- Vending machines including healthy options such as low fat milk and water, and a variety of fruit and vegetables.
- Designated spaces for local farmers to sell their products.

How can my community increase access to healthy food?

A healthy food environment is one in which access to food options is promoted and supported in the classroom, in the workplace, and throughout the community.

Schools and worksites can provide a healthy food environment by: (1) providing a place to eat that is both comfortable and pleasant; and (2) offering healthy food options in cafeterias, vending machines, at meetings, and at special events. These institutions can also create an environment that promotes learning about good eating and physical activity for long-term good health. Schools and worksites benefit from providing healthier work and school environments. For example, research consistently shows that eating a well-balanced breakfast improves employee performance and students' test scores; reduces tardiness and absenteeism; increases attention; and improves behavior and emotional adjustment.

The **community at large** can support healthy eating by providing healthy food choices at a reasonable price at restaurants, grocery stores, and convenience stores; by offering additional access to healthy foods (such as fruits and vegetables); by providing positive messages about healthy food choices; and by offering educational opportunities and support for improving eating habits.

Examples of nutrition environmental changes include increasing the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables via farmers' markets and community gardens; working with restaurants to provide menu recipe analysis; encouraging a worksite to provide formal policies so that healthy snacks are provided at meetings; increasing media promotion of healthy foods; or modifying the school food service environment to provide a greater number of options that are healthier.

Where do I start?

Resources from Michigan Health Tools: A gateway to better health in Michigan.

How do I know what the community wants and/or needs? The most logical answer to this question is to complete an assessment of the nutrition environment of the community. Tools are available to address healthy eating in communities and schools at <http://mihealthtools.org/>.

- **Healthy Community Checklist:** Discover the ways in which your community makes it easy for its residents to be healthy. The website features a 40-item quick assessment of a community's health environment related to promoting physical activity, healthy eating/healthy weight, and tobacco-free lifestyles.
- **Nutrition Environmental Assessment Tool:** Find out the ways in which your community supports healthy eating. This website is the home of the Nutrition Environment Assessment Tool (NEAT), an online assessment that can serve as the first step in improving your community's support of healthy eating. NEAT and the associated materials found on the website will also point to ways in which your community's environment can be improved to encourage healthier eating among its residents.
- **Healthy School Action Tool:** Aimed at bettering the health of our children by focusing on school environments where children spend much of their time. Healthy schools improve academic performance and help students establish positive habits that can last a lifetime.

The Healthy Schools websites feature the Healthy School Action Tool, a self-assessment and planning instrument to help schools take positive action, and the Healthy School Environment Recognition Program, to recognize schools who have demonstrated significant accomplishments in creating healthy environments.

When communities or schools complete an assessment, they receive feedback about the extent to which they make it easy for people to eat healthfully. They receive ideas about changes and improvements to make to promote healthier lifestyles.

An assessment is a powerful tool in identifying needed policy and environmental changes.

Well thought-out and enforced policies have the potential to impact a large number and variety of citizens. Policies can affect the quality and types of food available as well as the impact of profit-driven market forces.

Imagine the impact on a community's health and economy if a policy were:

- Enforced that encouraged local farming of crops and then required area meal providers (schools, hospitals, nursing homes, corrections, etc.) to purchase those locally grown crops as a top priority.
- Shaped in such a way that foods from farther away may be purchased if a sufficient supply of a locally-grown food item is not available.
- Allow for these food services to opt out of the agreement if costs become too high.

A well-crafted policy of this type has the potential to impact not only the health of those eating in the participating establishments, but a greater impact on the local economy as a whole.

Start Greening Your Community.

What good is community greening? In recent years, researchers have made some remarkable discoveries that demonstrate the benefits of greening. The Plant-People Council has established a bibliography of scientific studies highlighting the individual and community benefits of plants and greening activities – from evidence that gardening can help one sleep better to the observation that street plantings reduce graffiti on nearby walls.

In the words of University of Michigan psychologist Stephen Kaplan, the studies prove that “Nature is not just ‘nice’ . . . it is a vital ingredient in healthy human functioning.”

The fact is, plants have been linked to lower stress levels, a greater feeling of peacefulness and tranquility, a lower blood pressure, and decreased muscle tension. In addition, plants and greening activities have been linked to the development of healthy human communities. Researchers have found that they play at least three distinct roles in community development:

- Provide a more livable environment by controlling physical factors such as temperature, noise, and pollution;
- Help create a community image that is perceived as positive by both residents and outsiders; and
- Create opportunities for people to work together, be physically active regularly, and improve their community.

These factors translate directly into tangible economic and social benefits including reduced crime, higher property values in greened areas, nutritious food from community gardens, increased physical activity, and increased business activity in attractive, green neighborhoods.

The *Cultivating Community* monograph published by the American Community Gardening Association documents the stories of over a dozen community gardening organizations that have used community gardening to advance community organizing and development. These programs have been able to empower local leadership, nurture families, strengthen economic development, and improve quality of life overall.

How do I start a community or school garden?

It is important to recognize that there are many ways to start or manage a garden. In order for a garden to be sustainable as a true community/school resource, it must grow from local conditions and reflect the strengths, needs, and desires of the local community. Community/school gardens require diverse participation and leadership, at all phases of the garden operation. For ideas on sustaining a community garden, visit <http://www.growinghope.net/index.shtml>, <http://mixedgreens.org/>, or check out the *Growing Communities Curriculum* published by the American Community Gardening Association.

Farmers' Markets.

What is a farmers' market? A farmers' market is one in which farmers, growers or producers from a defined local area are present in person to sell their own produce, direct to the public. This type of direct marketing is an important sales outlet for agricultural producers nationwide. Farmers' markets continue to grow in popularity mostly due to the growing consumer interest in obtaining fresh products directly from the farm. The number of farmers' markets in the U.S. has grown dramatically, increasing 111 percent from 1994 to 2004. Benefits to communities from farmers' markets include:

- Revenue for the 94 percent of all farmers who have less than \$250,000 in annual farm receipts
- Access to locally grown, farm-fresh produce and the opportunity to personally interact with the farmer who grows the produce
- Nutrition education opportunities teaching wholesome eating habits and better food preparation
- Boost to the local community's economy
- Market income typically pays for all costs associated with operation of the market, leaving little or no reliance on grant or in-kind support.
- Twenty-five percent of markets participate in gleaning programs aiding food recovery organizations in the distribution of food and food products to needy families.

What is the difference between a farmers' market and a mini-market?

Farmers' markets bring the farmer directly to the consumer. However, there may be times when farmers are not available or opportunities where other interested parties may wish to provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables through a mini-market. Mini-markets are locations where a community group procures the fruits and vegetables from a local farmer or produce vendor, sets up a table and then sells the produce at cost to community members. Mini-markets have been successful at local churches, senior centers, and head start facilities. Markets like these typically run for an hour or two once or twice each month. For more information on mini-markets, contact Quentin Moore at (517) 324-7311 or qmoore@mphi.org.

Healthy Schools = Healthy Kids

The Healthy School Toolkit from Michigan Action For Healthy Kids provides the information, resources and tools needed to assist schools in providing an environment that supports healthy eating and physical activity habits of students, their families, school staff members, and the community. The major focuses of this effort are forming Coordinated School Health Teams, completing the Healthy School Action Tool, and making positive sustainable changes in the school environment.

This toolkit will help you increase access to healthy food and beverages in venues within the schools control like:

- Vending machines
- Classroom snacks
- Concessions
- Fundraisers
- À la carte sales
- Classroom rewards
- School stores
- School parties
- Student activities
- School meetings

The toolkit will help schools define what is a healthy food and beverage and outlines key tips for easily integrating healthy food and beverages into schools. Access this toolkit at:

<http://www.tn.fcs.msue.msu.edu/HealthySchoolToolkit.html>. Join Michigan Action For Healthy Kids at: http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/state_profile.php?state=MI.

Farm to School

The goal of farm to school is to increase children's consumption of local food including fresh fruits and vegetables. This can be accomplished by providing local farmers with opportunities to market directly to schools, developing school garden projects and building gardening and nutrition education into the curriculum. Farm to school programs bring together schools, farmers and other community resources to help children develop healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. You can increase access to healthy food through a farm to school project by:

- Starting a school garden: www.kidsgardening.com
- Developing a school based produce stand run by students: <http://www.urbannutrition.org/programs.html>
- Starting a school salad bar: <http://www.5aday.com/html/industry/modelbook.php>

Other Key Websites:

- <http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/> This is a USDA website with tips, information and resources for those interested in starting, growing or sustaining a farmers' market. Information includes the growth of farmers' markets from 1994-2004, funding for farmers' markets, and a locator option for finding local markets by state/city. Site is hosted by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) at the USDA.
- <http://www.localharvest.org/> Why buy locally grown? People worldwide are rediscovering the benefits of buying local food. It is fresher than anything in the supermarket and that means it is tastier and more nutritious. It is also good for your local economy--buying directly from family farmers helps them stay in business. Use this website to find farmers' markets, family farms, and other sources of sustainably grown food in your area, where you can buy produce, grass-fed meats, and many other goodies.
- <http://www.communitygarden.org/> The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) recognizes that community gardening improves the quality of life for people by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education.

- <http://www.pps.org/PublicMarkets/> Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities. PPS provides technical assistance, education, and research. The Public Market portion of the site includes funding opportunities, training opportunities, and sustainability ideas.
- <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/FactSheets/ProgramFactSheets.htm> This USDA site provides valuable links to learn more about the various nutrition and nutrition education programs administered by the USDA.
- <http://www.mottgroup.msu.edu/> The C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at MSU began in January 2003 as a vehicle to promote community engagement and scholarly activity focused on community-based food systems.
- http://www.michigan.gov/mda/0,1607,7-125-1570_23189-60796--,00.html Select Michigan is a consumer education program aimed at helping shoppers more easily identify and purchase Michigan-grown, processed or manufactured local and organic food products.
- <http://www.farmtoschool.org/> Farm to School programs are popping up all over the U.S. These programs connect schools with local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing health and nutrition education opportunities that will last a lifetime, and supporting local small farmers.
- <http://www.mypyramid.gov> My Pyramid is the graphic icon and related information translating the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans into language for consumers. The MyPyramid Plan can help you choose the foods and amounts that are right for you.
- <http://www.mifffs.org/> Michigan Integrated Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) is a collaborative effort to create and support more sustainable food and agriculture systems for producers and consumers in Michigan. Agricultural productivity, economic viability, environmental protection, resource efficiency, and strong communities are all important goals of MIFFS.
- <http://www.fooddeserts.org> The food desert website tells you all about food deserts, why they affect everybody, the links to globalization and social exclusion, and how the effects of food deserts may be alleviated or eliminated.